



# N-doped ZrO<sub>2</sub>/TiO<sub>2</sub> bimetallic materials synthesized in supercritical CO<sub>2</sub>: Morphology and photocatalytic activity

Rahima A. Lucky, Paul A. Charpentier\*

Department of Chemical and Biochemical Engineering, University of Western Ontario, London, Ontario, Canada N6A 5B9

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## ABSTRACT

A series of N- and N/Zr-doped titanium nanomaterials were synthesized via an acetic acid modified sol–gel route using supercritical carbon dioxide (scCO<sub>2</sub>) as both the synthesis and drying medium. Titanium isopropoxide (TIP), and triethylamine (TEA) w/o zirconium propoxide precursors were reacted with acetic acid in a polycondensation reaction in scCO<sub>2</sub>. The effects of N and N/Zr doping on the morphology, phase structure, mean crystallite size, textural properties, thermal and crystallization behavior, and photocatalytic degradation of methylene blue was investigated. SEM and TEM analysis showed that pure titania formed nanofibers from TIP and acetic acid whereas the doped samples gave a flake-like structure. The SEM and TEM images showed that a porous material consisting of ca. 10–15 nm crystals were formed. XPS spectra indicated that the N<sub>1s</sub> peak for both N-doped titania and Ti–Zr binary metal oxide were centered at 400 eV, indicating effective doping of nitrogen in the TiO<sub>2</sub> matrix. From the XRD analysis, it was observed that a small amount of nitrogen and zirconia inhibited the crystal growth, resulting in smaller crystallite materials. The BET analysis of the N<sub>2</sub> isotherm data revealed that small amount of zirconia and nitrogen (0.4 at%) increased the surface area. All synthesized doped samples gave superior photocatalytic degradation of methylene blue compared to P25. These results show that scCO<sub>2</sub> is a new promising route to provide N- and N/Zr-doped advanced photocatalytic nanomaterials.

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## 1. Introduction

TiO<sub>2</sub> nanomaterial is a potential candidate for solar applications such as dye-sensitized solar cells (DSSCs) and next-generation photocatalytic reactors due to titania's unique optoelectronic and photochemical properties [1–3]. However, pure anatase TiO<sub>2</sub> activates at  $\lambda < 380$  nm of UV light, leaving approximately 95% of the available solar energy unused, and shows a high recombination rate of the photogenerated electron–hole pairs [4]. In the technical literature, numerous studies have focused on shifting TiO<sub>2</sub>'s band gap to the visible spectral region, in order to harness more of the visible light, hence, greatly expanding its application [5–8]. Through several theoretical and experimental investigations conducted by Ashai and coworkers, along with others on the effects of different non-metal doping systems in TiO<sub>2</sub>, N doping has been shown to be a very effective technique for band gap narrowing, resulting in visible light absorption [9–12]. In addition, Wang et al. investigated the role of the potential promoter ZrO<sub>2</sub> in enhancing activity of TiO<sub>2-x</sub>N<sub>x</sub> for the oxidation of gaseous organic compounds [13].

They reported that ZrO<sub>2</sub> helped to preserve the surface area and prevent grain growth resulting in higher activity. Therefore, simultaneous Zr and N doping could help to enhance the performance of TiO<sub>2</sub> nanomaterials for photocatalysis as Zr doping has been shown to increase the surface area and thermal stability while reducing the crystal size of the TiO<sub>2</sub> nanomaterials [14,15].

Most of the methods currently being used for catalyst synthesis suffer scale-up problems, and are not environmentally friendly. These include template methods, hydrothermal, solvothermal and CVD processes [16]. Recently, the sol–gel process has become an attractive synthesis route to produce high quality, homogeneous metal oxide materials with desired nanostructure at low cost [17,18] and has been used for synthesizing N-doped TiO<sub>2</sub> [19]. Drying of the gel with supercritical carbon dioxide (scCO<sub>2</sub>) forms aerogels, which possess catalytically favorable textural properties with high accessible internal surface areas and excellent availability of active centers to a reactant [20]. Previously we synthesized ZrO<sub>2</sub>–TiO<sub>2</sub> nanotubular and nanorod structures in scCO<sub>2</sub>, finding that it was an attractive solvent for the synthesis and processing of high quality porous materials [21]. There are several favorable physical properties such as low viscosity, “zero” surface tension and high diffusivity of scCO<sub>2</sub> which enable it to produce superior ultra-fine and uniform nanomaterials [22,23]. In addition, scCO<sub>2</sub> can be removed completely from the products by venting; hence, no drying process is required and the porous structure can be maintained

\* Corresponding author at: Department of Chemical and Biochemical Engineering, University of Western Ontario, Faculty of Engineering, London, Ontario, Canada N6A 5B9. Tel.: +1 519 661 3466; fax: +1 519 661 3498.

E-mail address: [pcharpentier@eng.uwo.ca](mailto:pcharpentier@eng.uwo.ca) (P.A. Charpentier).

without collapsing the nanostructure. Furthermore,  $\text{scCO}_2$  can be easily recycled after the pressure is diminished for potential scale-up. Therefore, this research examines the synthesis of  $\text{TiO}_2$  based nanomaterials by simultaneous zirconium and nitrogen doping via the sol–gel process in  $\text{scCO}_2$ . The morphology, crystal structure, crystal size, surface area, pore volume and pore size distribution of the synthesized nanomaterials were examined, along with characterizing their photocatalytic ability using the model compound methylene blue, showing the materials provided superior photocatalytic ability compared to the standard titania photocatalyst (Degussa P25).

## 2. Experimental

### 2.1. Materials

Reagent grade titanium (IV) isopropoxide (TIP, 97%, Aldrich), zirconium (IV) propoxide (ZPO, 70%, Aldrich), acetic acid (99.7%, Aldrich), isopropanol (99.5%, Aldrich), triethylamine (TEA, 99.7%, Aldrich), and instrument grade carbon dioxide (99.99%, BOC) were used without further purification.

### 2.2. Synthesis

Both N- and N/Zr-doped  $\text{TiO}_2$  nanomaterials were synthesized following the standard procedure previously provided [21] using TIP, ZPO and TEA. In a typical experiment, 6.6 mmol TIP, 0.4 mmol ZPO, 35 mmol acetic acid and the appropriate amount of TEA were quickly placed in a 10 mL view cell under stirring. Then  $\text{CO}_2$  was added to the system with heating to achieve a final temperature and pressure of 60 °C and 5000 psig, respectively. Initially, a transparent homogeneous pale yellow to brown phase was observed depending on the TEA/TIP ratio. After the reaction mixture was stirred for 30 min to several hours, the fluids in the view cell became semi-transparent then turned white, indicating a phase change and gel formation. After 5 days of aging, a few droplets were vented and placed in a test tube, followed by addition of water. When a higher amount of TEA was used, white precipitate formed indicating incomplete polycondensation. However, to maintain consistency, after 5 days of aging, the nanomaterial samples were washed using  $\text{CO}_2$  at a controlled flow rate ( $\approx 0.5$  ml/min). As-prepared samples were taken for subsequent characterization, with the remainder calcined in air at 500 °C using a heating rate of 10 °C/min, holding time of 2 h, and cooling rate to room temperature of 0.5 °C/min. The following samples were prepared: (1) pure  $\text{TiO}_2$ , (2) Zr modified  $\text{TiO}_2$ , (3)  $\text{TiO}_2$ –N1 and  $\text{TiO}_2$ –N2, respectively, and (4) Zr– $\text{TiO}_2$ –N1 and Zr– $\text{TiO}_2$ –N2. The ratio of TEA/Ti precursors is 0.4 and 0.6 for sample named N1 and N2, respectively.

### 2.3. Characterization

Scanning electron microscopy (SEM) measurements were used to determine the size and morphology of nanomaterials using a LEO 1530 SEM. Transmission electron microscopy (TEM) and high resolution TEM (HRTEM) images were obtained using a Philips CM 10 and JOEL 2010f, respectively. The specimens were dispersed in methanol and placed on a copper grid covered with holey carbon film. Thermo-gravimetric analysis (TGA) was performed under nitrogen atmosphere on a TA Instrument TA-Q500 at a heating rate of 10 °C/min from room temperature to 800 °C. X-ray diffraction (XRD) was performed utilizing Rigaku employing  $\text{CuK}\alpha 1 + \text{K}\alpha 2 = 1.54184$  Å radiation with a power of 40 kV–35 mA for the crystalline analysis. The broad-scan analysis was typically conducted within the  $2\theta$  range of 10–80°, and the strongest peak for the anatase (1 0 1) and the rutile (1 1 0) phases of  $\text{TiO}_2$  was used to

determine the average N-doped Zr– $\text{TiO}_2$  nanocrystallite size using Scherrer's equation:

$$D = \frac{0.9\lambda}{\beta \cos \theta} \quad (1)$$

where  $D$  is the average nanocrystallite size (nm),  $\lambda$  is the X-ray wavelength (1.541 Å),  $\beta$  is the full-width at half-maximum intensity (in radian), and  $\theta$  is the half of diffraction peak angle.

The samples were further analyzed using a Renishaw Model 2000 Raman spectrometer equipped with a 633 nm laser. The power at the sample varied between 0.2 and 0.5 mW with the beam defocused to an area of approximately 5–10  $\mu\text{m}$  in diameter. The microstructural properties such as surface area, pore volume and pore size distribution of the aerogels and the oxides was obtained using  $\text{N}_2$  physisorption at 77 K with a Micromeritics ASAP 2010. Prior to the  $\text{N}_2$  physisorption, the samples were degassed at 200 °C under vacuum. From the  $\text{N}_2$  adsorption isotherms, the specific surface area was calculated. The mesopore volume ( $V_{\text{BJH}}$ ), the average pore diameters ( $d_p$ ), and the pore size distributions were estimated by the Barret–Joyner–Halenda (BJH) method applied to the desorption branch of the isotherm.

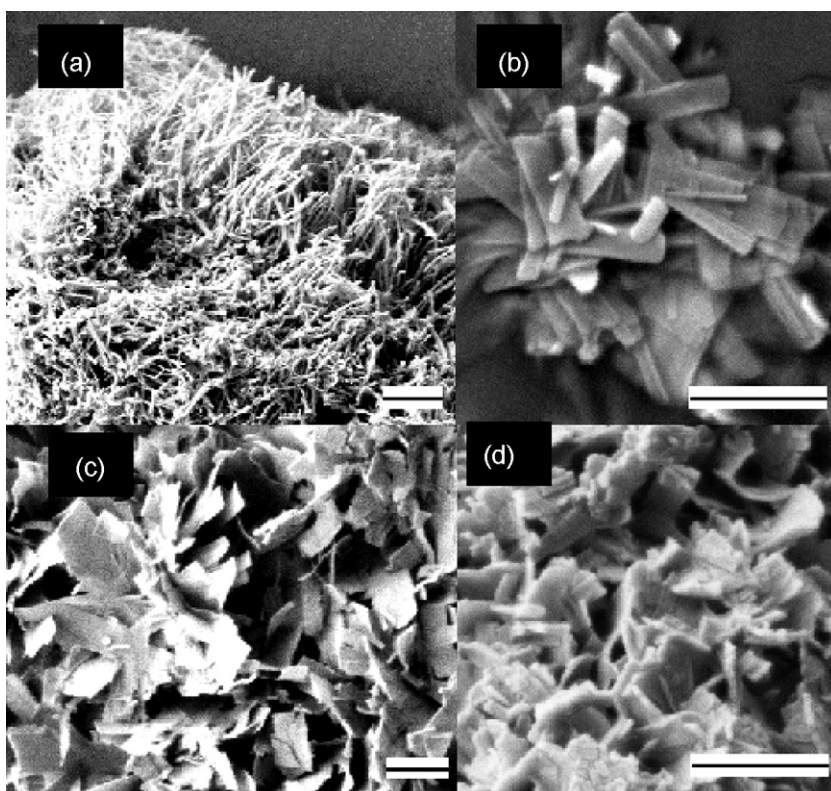
### 2.4. Photocatalytic activity

Methylene blue (MB, 0.05 wt% water solution, Sigma-Aldrich), was chosen as the model organic compound to evaluate the photoactivity of the prepared  $\text{TiO}_2$  based nanomaterials. The catalytic performance was evaluated under UV light irradiation using a 100 W high-pressure mercury lamp (UVP, USA) with a wavelength range of 320–400 nm and peak wavelength of 365 nm. Typically, a mixture of methylene blue solution (15  $\mu\text{mol/L}$ , 100 mL) and 25 mg of catalyst was vigorously stirred for 30 min to establish an adsorption/desorption equilibrium. Then the reaction solution was stirred under light irradiation. The temperature of the photocatalytic reaction was measured by thermometer and found not to deviate significantly from room temperature. At given time intervals, 3 mL aliquots were sampled and centrifuged to remove the particles. The filtrates were analyzed by measuring the absorption band maximum (665 nm) using a Cary 50 UV–vis spectrophotometer. The methylene blue concentration was calculated by using a calibration curve according to the absorbance intensity at 665 nm in the photocatalytic process. A control photodegradation experiment was also performed without catalyst, resulting in a negligible decrease in concentration (below 2%) during the 1-h irradiation period. When the experiment was carried out with catalyst but in the absence of light irradiation, no change in methylene blue concentration was observed. Repeat tests were run to ensure data reliability.

## 3. Results and discussion

### 3.1. Synthesis and morphology

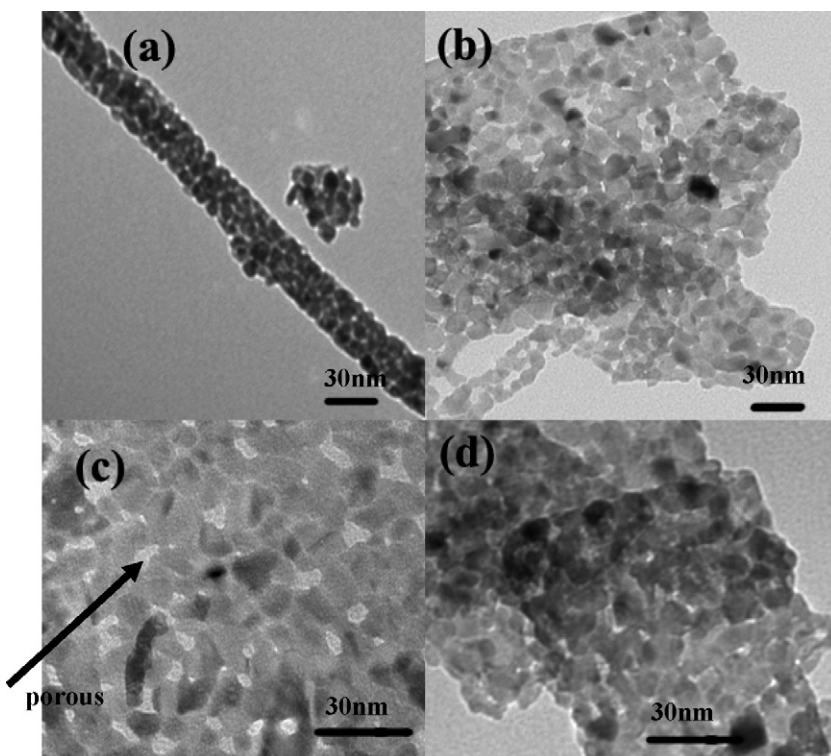
The morphology and size of the as-prepared materials synthesized in supercritical carbon dioxide ( $\text{scCO}_2$ ) were characterized by SEM analysis as shown in Fig. 1. The pure  $\text{TiO}_2$  nanomaterials (Fig. 1(A)) consisted of nanofibers having 20–50 nm diameter, consistent with the previous work reported by Sui et al. [22]. The N-doped  $\text{TiO}_2$  consists of uniform sized sheets of 200 nm width and ca. 1  $\mu\text{m}$  length (Fig. 1(B)). In our previous work, we observed nanotubular structures of Zr– $\text{TiO}_2$  being formed in  $\text{scCO}_2$  that we attributed to a “roll-up” mechanism [21,24]. However, here we see that Zr modified N-doped  $\text{TiO}_2$  exhibits a flower type structure consisting of sheets ca. 500 nm width as shown in Fig. 1(C) with very thin edges. Further increasing the N concentration gave a denser nanostructure (Fig. 1(D)).



**Fig. 1.** SEM: (A)  $\text{TiO}_2$ , (B)  $\text{TiO}_2\text{-N1}$ , (C)  $\text{Zr-TiO}_2\text{-N1}$ , and (D)  $\text{Zr-TiO}_2\text{-N2}$ . (Bar represents 500 nm. All the samples were examined after platinum coating).

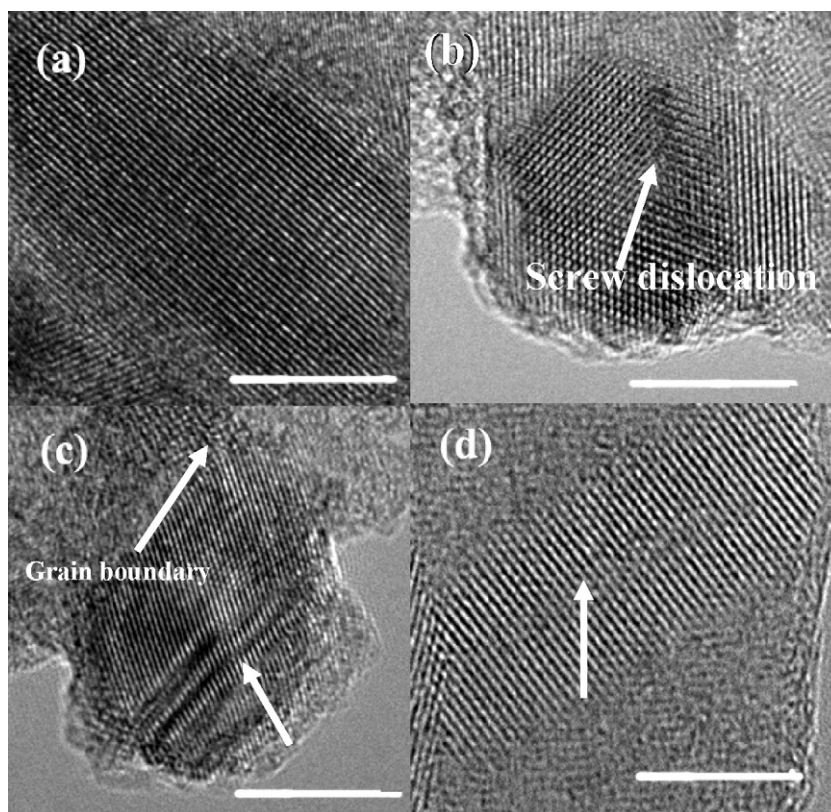
TEM analysis was performed to obtain more detailed structural information on the calcined materials, with the images given in Fig. 2. It can be seen that calcined pure  $\text{TiO}_2$  fibers have 30 nm diameters (Fig. 2(A)) whereas all N-doped samples are sheets with

100–300 nm width (Fig. 2(B–D)). The TEM images also confirmed that the doping agent had a significant effect on the crystal size and porosity of the calcined nanomaterials. The measured crystal size for all systems was ca. 10–15 nm, though the shapes of



**Fig. 2.** TEM: (A)  $\text{TiO}_2$ , (B)  $\text{TiO}_2\text{-N1}$ , (C)  $\text{Zr-TiO}_2\text{-N1}$ , and (D)  $\text{TiO}_2\text{-N2}$ . (Bar represents 30 nm).





**Fig. 3.** HRTEM for N-doped  $\text{TiO}_2$  nanomaterials: (A)  $\text{TiO}_2$ , (B)  $\text{TiO}_2\text{-N1}$ , (C)  $\text{Zr-TiO}_2\text{-N1}$ , and (D)  $\text{TiO}_2\text{-N2}$ . (Bar represents 5 nm. Arrows indicate defects).

the crystallites are different. Pure  $\text{TiO}_2$  formed nice cubic crystals whereas in the modified system, poorer crystallinity was observed. It is known that the Zr and N present in the samples retards the reorganization for forming ordered crystal structures, resulting in poor crystallinity for the modified systems [25,26]. Similar to the SEM results, the TEM images also confirm that the materials were very solid (less porous) when a higher amount of triethylamine was used.

To explore the crystal structure in more detail, HRTEM analysis for both the pure  $\text{TiO}_2$  and the modified samples calcined at  $500^\circ\text{C}$  was performed. The HRTEM micrographs for the pure  $\text{TiO}_2$  in Fig. 3(A) demonstrate long grains having the anatase crystal phase with a  $d$ -spacing 0.35 nm. This  $d$ -spacing value is assigned to the lattice spacing of the (1 0 1) planes of the anatase phase. Upon introducing dopant into the  $\text{TiO}_2$  matrix, the crystallites became smaller. However, the HRTEM analysis further reveals that the N-doped systems (Fig. 3(B–D)) have many defects (grain boundary, lattice mismatch, screw dislocation), which may be due to the presence of alkylamine in the synthesis process. Alkylamines can be selectively adsorbed on certain crystal facets of metal oxides, or form amine complexes with metal alkoxides, thus leading to orientated growth or aggregation of the metal oxide particles [27,28].

TG–DTG analysis was carried out to study the thermal decomposition behavior of the synthesized nanomaterials, in order to confirm the proper calcination temperature to provide crystal structure. The TG curves given in Fig. 4(A) along with the DTG curves (Fig. 4(B)) show three regions of weight loss in the range 25–125, 125–500 and above  $500^\circ\text{C}$ . Usually, the first stage of weight loss is attributed to the removal of physically adsorbed organics and water, while the second range is mainly attributed to the removal of coordinated organic material, i.e. acetic acid [29,30]. In the first stage, all samples similarly lost ca. 4–5 wt%, however, a significant difference in weight loss is observed in the second stage for the studied samples. The pure  $\text{TiO}_2$  sample lost 51 wt% in the second

stage, whereas N-doped  $\text{TiO}_2$  lost 55 wt%. However, upon introducing 6% Zr into the matrix, the samples became more condensed compared to  $\text{TiO}_2$  as previously observed by SEM, and only 50% weight loss was found during this stage. Moreover, when N was introduced into the  $\text{ZrO}_2\text{-TiO}_2$  system through TEA, the weight loss was lower compared to the N-doped  $\text{TiO}_2$ , i.e. 51%. The DTG curves presented in Fig. 4(B) clearly show the effects of dopant on the removal of organic residue by heat treatment. The peak position (Fig. 4(B) (b) and (d)) shifted to lower values compared to pure  $\text{TiO}_2$  (Fig. 4(B) (a)) after introducing triethylamine, regardless of Zr modification, indicating easy removal of the residue. However, the opposite phenomenon was observed for zirconia doping, where the Zr cation shifted the peak positions to a higher value (Fig. 4(B) (c)) indicating higher thermal stability. Higher thermal stability is a well known property of  $\text{ZrO}_2$ , which has been observed in many systems [31]. The weight loss over  $500^\circ\text{C}$  was extremely small for all samples showing that  $500^\circ\text{C}$  is a reasonable calcination temperature for these samples. Hence, this analysis shows that the studied dopants have a very prominent effect on the decomposition or removal of the organic residue.

### 3.2. XRD analysis

The crystal structure and crystallite size of the nanomaterials calcined at  $500^\circ\text{C}$  were examined by XRD, with the spectra given in Fig. 5. This figure shows that all modified calcined nanomaterials consist of anatase crystal, although the peak intensity as well as the FWHM strongly depends on the type and amount of dopant. The pure  $\text{TiO}_2$  (Fig. 5(a)) showed a very small rutile phase (4 wt%) at this temperature. For Fig. 5(d–f), no distinct  $\text{ZrO}_2$  or in the N containing samples (b, c, e, f) no TiN peak is evident, indicating no phase separation, and that the dopant was contained in the anatase crystal structure for this composition.

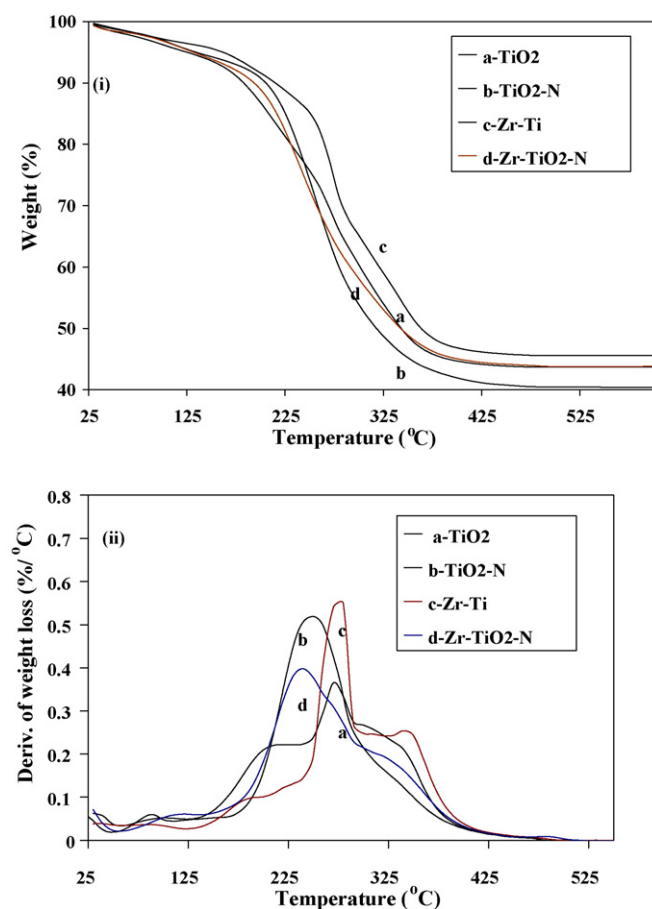


Fig. 4. Thermal decomposition behavior of N-doped nanomaterials as a function of temperature: (A) TG and (B) DTG.

The crystallite sizes for the various synthesized samples were calculated using Scherer's equation from the XRD data (Eq. (1) in Section 2), and are given in Table 1. It can be seen that the crystal size for pure TiO<sub>2</sub> calcined at 500 °C was *ca.* 13.8 nm, whereas TiO<sub>2</sub>-N1 had 12.9 nm crystallites with a higher amount of TEA (TiO<sub>2</sub>-N2) further reducing the crystallite size to 8.7 nm. The Zr modified nanomaterials had smaller crystallites compared to the unmodified samples, regardless of the amount of TEA used. Moreover, TEA reduced the crystallinity of the modified samples compared to unmodified samples decreasing Zr-TiO<sub>2</sub> from 12.3 to 11.1 nm for Zr-TiO<sub>2</sub>-N1 and 6.2 nm for Zr-TiO<sub>2</sub>-N2. These results are consistent with those obtained from the TEM analysis. The dopant prevents rearrangement of atoms to form crystal, hence lowering crystallinity and giving smaller size crystallites [26].

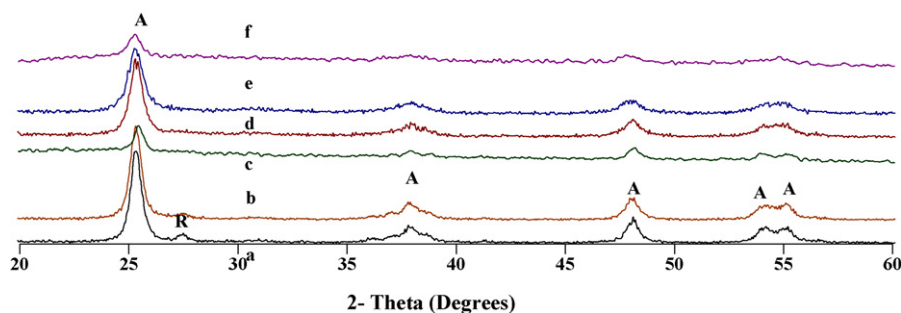


Fig. 5. Powder XRD spectra of the Zr modified N-doped TiO<sub>2</sub> nanomaterials calcined at 500 °C: (a) TiO<sub>2</sub>, (b) TiO<sub>2</sub>-N1, (c) TiO<sub>2</sub>-N2, (d) Zr-TiO<sub>2</sub>, (e) Zr-TiO<sub>2</sub>-N1, and (f) Zr-TiO<sub>2</sub>-N2. (A-anatase, R-rutile).

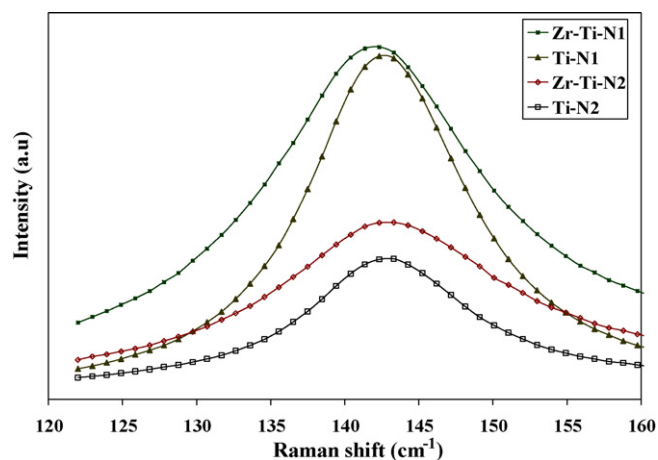


Fig. 6. Raman spectra around 142 cm<sup>-1</sup> for Zr modified N-doped TiO<sub>2</sub> nanomaterials calcined at 500 °C.

### 3.3. Raman

To further verify these results, Raman analysis was performed on all the N-doped samples. The spectra for the calcined samples show Raman peaks at 142, 395, 517 and 639 cm<sup>-1</sup> that can be assigned to the E<sub>g</sub>, B<sub>1g</sub>, B<sub>1g</sub>/A<sub>1g</sub>, E<sub>g</sub>, modes of the anatase of titania, respectively, which agrees with published values [32]. However, the most intense anatase peak at  $\approx 142$  cm<sup>-1</sup> showed significant differences amongst the different samples (Fig. 6). The Raman peaks usually display smaller linewidths (FWHM) for larger crystallites due to an increase in the correlation length of the vibrations, with increasing intensity indicating greater concentrations of anatase phase [33]. The FWHM of the anatase peak were *ca.* 11 cm<sup>-1</sup> for both the Ti and Zr-Ti systems modified with a lower amount of triethylamine. However, this value increased to *ca.* 15 cm<sup>-1</sup> for samples prepared using a higher amount of TEA. More importantly, the Raman peak intensity reduced to half compared to the previous system, indicating lower crystallinity. Moreover, the peaks shifted to higher frequencies, also confirming smaller crystallite sizes were formed.

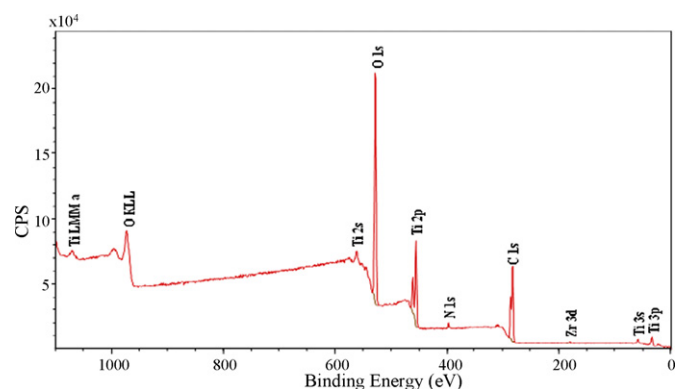
### 3.4. XPS analysis

Fig. 7 shows a typical XPS spectrum for the Zr modified N-doped TiO<sub>2</sub> nanomaterials synthesized by the sol-gel process in scCO<sub>2</sub>. XPS peaks show that the Zr-TiO<sub>2</sub>-N powder contains Ti, Zr, O, N, and C elements. The presence of carbon is ascribed to the residual carbon from the precursor solution, and any adventitious hydrocarbon from the XPS instrument itself. This XPS data reveals that the Zr and N elements are incorporated into the TiO<sub>2</sub> crystal lattice, or were adsorbed onto the surface of the crystals.

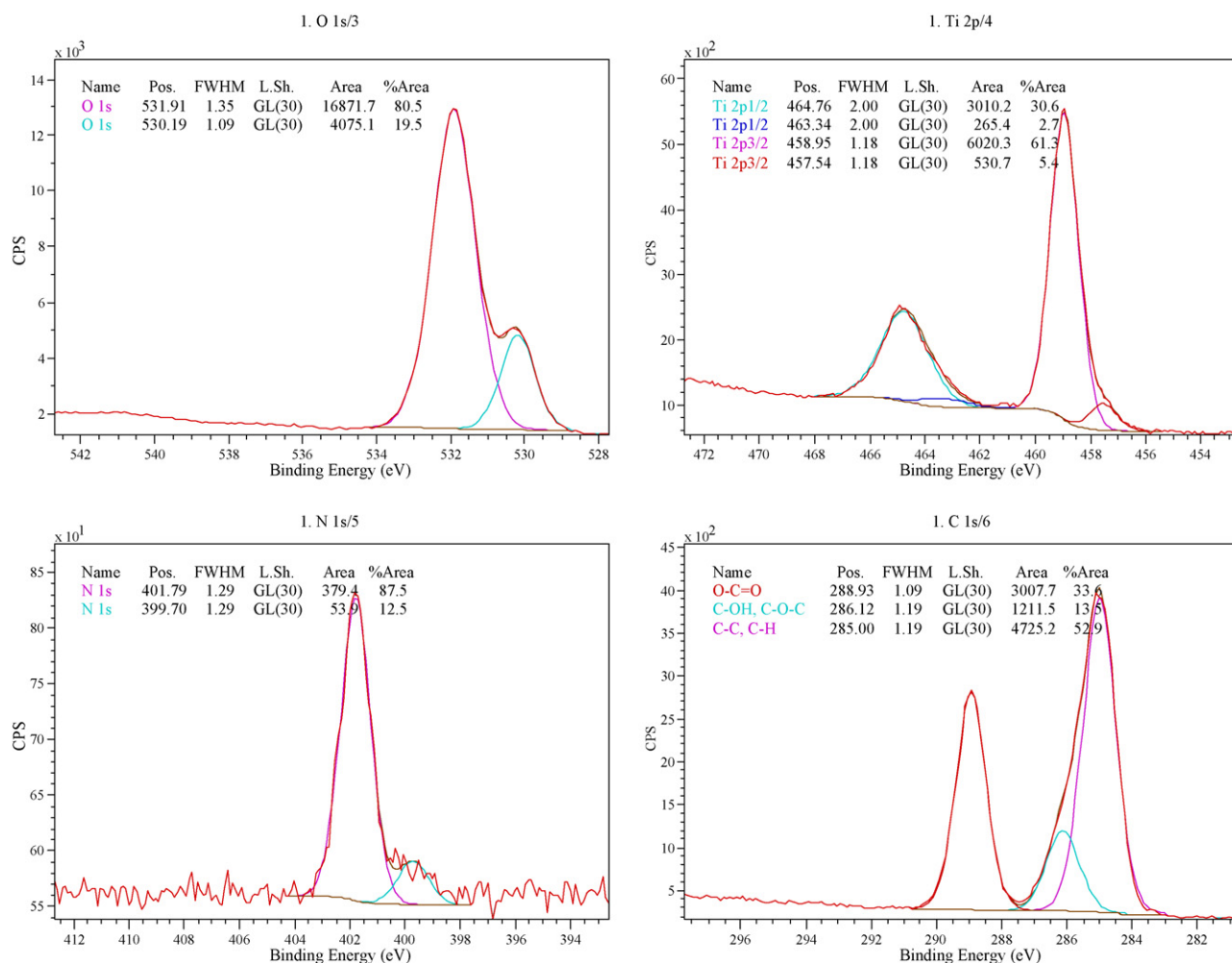
**Table 1**

Surface area, pore volume, pore diameter, and crystallites size for calcined undoped and doped nanomaterials.

Sample	Surface A (m <sup>2</sup> /g)	Pore V (cm <sup>3</sup> /g)	Pore diameter (nm)	Crystal size (nm) ± 1 nm	Crystal structure
TiO <sub>2</sub>	56	0.26	18.9	13.8	A
TiO <sub>2</sub> -N1	78	0.31	13.7	12.9	A
TiO <sub>2</sub> -N2	65	0.19	12.0	8.7	A
Zr-TiO <sub>2</sub>	81	0.27	13.7	12.3	A
Zr-TiO <sub>2</sub> -N1	94	0.25	10.3	11.1	A
Zr-TiO <sub>2</sub> -N2	72	0.33	18.4	6.2	A

**Fig. 7.** Typical XPS spectrum for Zr modified N-doped TiO<sub>2</sub> as-prepared nanomaterials.

For further analysis of the chemical structure of the investigated samples, five areas of the deconvoluted XPS spectrum for the Zr-TiO<sub>2</sub>-N as-prepared nanomaterials were examined: i.e. Ti 2p around 460 eV, Zr 3d around 183 eV, N 1s around 400 eV, O 1s around 530 eV and C 1s around 286 eV region (see Fig. 8). When scanning the Ti 2p and Zr 3d XPS regions, significant differences are observed at the binding energies between the pure TiO<sub>2</sub> and the modified system. According to Galindo et al., TiO<sub>2</sub> Ti 2p<sub>3/2</sub> and ZrO<sub>2</sub> Zr 3d<sub>5/2</sub> showed peaks at the binding energies 458.8 and 183 eV, respectively [34]. It was observed previously that introducing Zr metal ion into the lattice shifts the binding energy [21]. This XPS analysis revealed that regardless of Zr modification, the binding energy for Ti 2p<sub>3/2</sub> shifted to lower values compared to pure TiO<sub>2</sub>. The small shift of binding energy of the Ti 2p<sub>3/2</sub> peak is attributed to the change of the valence state of Ti<sup>4+</sup>. This supports that upon doping, Ti<sup>4+</sup> is converted to Ti<sup>3+</sup>. The observed binding energy of zirconia Zr 3d<sub>5/2</sub>, also shows a lower value compared to pure zirco-

**Fig. 8.** Deconvoluted XPS spectrum for (A) O, (B) Ti, (C) N, and (D) in N-doped TiO<sub>2</sub> as-prepared nanomaterials.



nia, i.e.  $182.70 \pm 0.02$ . The O 1s XPS spectra also shows significant changes upon N incorporation, with the peak shifted to a lower binding energy, i.e. 529.92 eV compared to the pure oxygen peak in  $\text{TiO}_2$ , i.e. 530 eV.

The most interesting changes occur around the C 1s peak, and the resolved C peak shows that three different types of carbon containing groups are present around 288, 286, and 284 eV, representing the O–C=O, C–N, and C–C and C–H groups, respectively. However, only two instead of three carbon groups such as O–C=O, and C–C and C–H were present in the pure  $\text{TiO}_2$  system. This additional carbon peak indicates that the amine group is directly absorbed onto the surface of the materials, forming metal complexes. It is well known that with two nonbonding electron, nitrogen acts as a Lewis base and forms complexes with electrophilic metal ions [35].

The analysis of the binding energy of N 1s for the N-doped materials shows that two types of N are present in the as-prepared nanomaterials. An intense peak centered at 401.8 and a small peak centered at 399.9 eV, are assigned to chemisorbed and interstitial N, respectively [36–39]. However, the binding energies are greater than the typical binding energy of 397.2 eV in TiN [40]. This higher energy shift can be attributed to the 1s electron binding energy of the N atom in the environment of O–Ti–N. When nitrogen substitutes for the oxygen in the initial O–Ti–O structure, the electron density around N is reduced, compared to that in a TiN crystal, because of the O atom bonded to the Ti atom [36]. After heat treatment, there is only one peak which is centered at 400 eV. Recently, most of the studies regarding the N-doped  $\text{TiO}_2$  systems have performed XPS analysis to investigate the chemical state of N. Chen and Burda found that the signal at 401.3 eV in the synthesized nanoparticles is attributed to O–Ti–N, based on the redox chemistry involved [36]. In another study, Yang et al. reported a binding energy of 400.1 eV which was assigned to hyponitrite at the surface [37]. Thus, the nitrogen state in the doped  $\text{TiO}_2$  may vary from case to case. However, very recently Huo et al. reported a peak at 399.6 eV, ascribed to the N species incorporation into the titania matrix [28]. Keeping all this in mind, it can be concluded that all N species during calcination were incorporated into the  $\text{TiO}_2$  matrix, and the resultant nanomaterials were described as Zr and N codoped  $\text{TiO}_2$ .

### 3.5. BET analysis

The microstructural properties, i.e. the surface area, pore volume, and pore size distributions of all samples were characterized by nitrogen adsorption studies, which were summarized previously in Table 1. The BET surface areas of the calcined materials given in Table 1 show that the modified samples possess higher surface areas compared to the pure  $\text{nTiO}_2$ . However, the materials synthesized with a higher amount of TEA showed a lower surface area. This is expected as the SEM and TEM analysis demonstrated that denser materials were formed using a higher amount of TEA. Fig. 9 shows a typical nitrogen adsorption isotherm for calcined Zr modified N-doped  $\text{TiO}_2$ , which exhibits an H3 hysteresis loop, typical for mesoporous materials [41]. The typical pore size distribution is inset in Fig. 9 which shows that most pores are larger than 20 nm, whereas a small number of ca. 4 nm diameter pores are present in the samples. The pore volume for all samples did not follow any clear trend with doping while generally the average pore diameters decreased with increasing N content.

### 3.6. Photocatalytic performance

Methylene blue was chosen as the model organic compound to evaluate the photoactivity of the prepared  $\text{TiO}_2$  based nanomaterials. When the MB dye and  $\text{TiO}_2$  catalyst suspension is irradiated

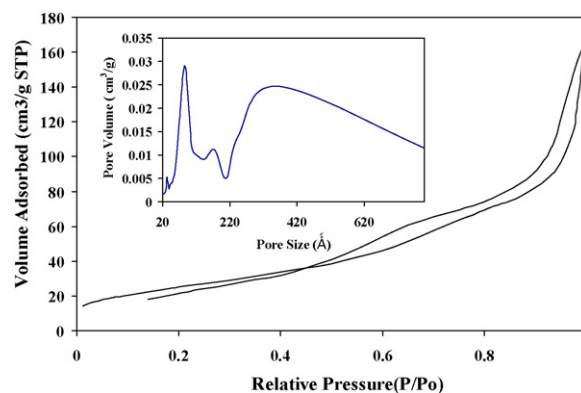


Fig. 9.  $\text{N}_2$  adsorption/desorption isotherm of the Zr modified N-doped  $\text{TiO}_2$  calcined nanomaterials. Inset shows the pore size distribution.

with the UV radiation, the  $e^-/h^+$  pair is created within the  $\text{TiO}_2$  nanocrystallites due to ejection of an electron from the valence band into the conduction band, leaving behind a hole in the valence band (charge-carrier generation). The generated holes may react with the surface-adsorbed  $^-\text{OH}$  ions forming the  $\bullet\text{OH}$  radicals. The  $\bullet\text{OH}$  radicals may also be formed by the reaction of dissolved oxygen ( $\text{O}_2$ ) with the generated electrons and the protons forming the hydrogen peroxide ( $\text{H}_2\text{O}_2$ ) as an intermediate product, which subsequently gets decomposed to the  $^-\text{OH}$  radical by releasing the  $^-\text{OH}$  ion into the aqueous solution. The overall reaction results in the decomposition of the MB dye into carbon dioxide ( $\text{CO}_2$ ), nitrate ( $\text{NO}_3^-$ ) ions, sulfate ( $\text{SO}_4^{2-}$ ) ions, protons, and water. The efficacy of the above mechanism in decomposing the MB dye depends on the effectiveness of the photocatalytic process in transferring the photoinduced  $e^-/h^+$  pair from the particle volume to the particle surface, and subsequently to the surface-adsorbed species. The generated  $e^-/h^+$  pair, hence, must migrate to the particle surface as a separate entity. However, if the  $\text{TiO}_2$  nanocrystallite size is relatively larger, the travel distance for the  $e^-/h^+$  pair is increased, facilitating recombination within the particle volume before reaching the particle surface (volume charge-carrier recombination) [42].

Fig. 10 compares the degradation rates for the various synthesized photocatalysts synthesized using  $\text{scCO}_2$  for this study. The degradation rate for pure  $\text{TiO}_2$  was  $0.086 \text{ min}^{-1}$  and this value increased with the amount of N in the sample becoming 0.186 and  $0.203 \text{ min}^{-1}$  for  $\text{TiO}_2\text{-N1}$  and  $\text{TiO}_2\text{-N2}$  samples, respectively. In the Zr modified system, without N doping the degradation

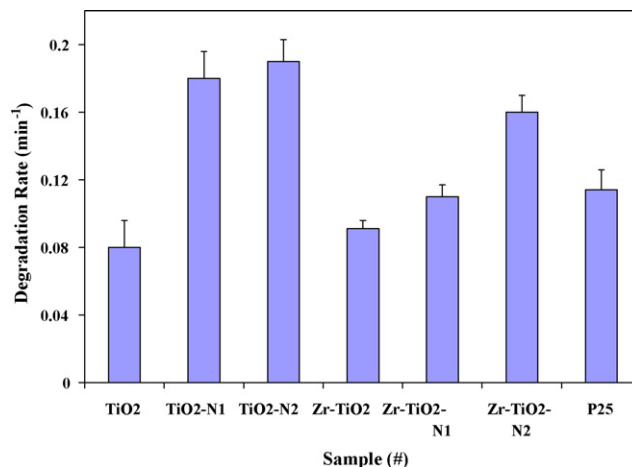


Fig. 10. The variation of the calculated degradation rate for Zr modified N-doped  $\text{TiO}_2$  nanomaterials.

rate was  $0.092 \text{ min}^{-1}$ , whereas the value increased to  $0.117$  and  $0.161 \text{ min}^{-1}$  for Zr–TiO<sub>2</sub>–N1 and Zr–TiO<sub>2</sub>–N2 samples, respectively. The provided results indicate that all N-doped samples show better photocatalytic activity compared to the undoped samples. However, the activity enhancement is higher in TiO<sub>2</sub> samples over Zr modified TiO<sub>2</sub> samples. For comparison purposes, the degradation experiment was also performed using commercially available P25 TiO<sub>2</sub> (surface area  $50 \text{ m}^2/\text{g}$ ), and the calculated value was  $0.116 \text{ min}^{-1}$ . The degradation rate of N-doped TiO<sub>2</sub> was nearly 1.7 times higher than P-25, showing a good potential for practical applications in photocatalysis.

The enhancement in photocatalytic performance of the N-doped TiO<sub>2</sub> samples can be explained by the higher surface area with mesoporous structure, reduction in the crystallite size and defects induced by N doping [39,43–45]. The higher surface areas with mesoporous structure favor the adsorption of reactant molecules, as well as light absorbance. Moreover, the N-modified samples that were found to consist of smaller crystallites (as determined from the XRD data) provide higher interfacial area and better access to the active sites. In addition, the increase of defects which were observed by the HRTEM images could capture more photoelectrons and thus reduce their recombination with photoinduced holes. These factors could enhance the quantum efficiency, leading to higher photocatalytic activity. In addition, the novel synthesis method utilized eliminated the formation of various secondary and impure phases such as metal titanates and/or metal oxides at high temperatures and inhibited the reduction of the photocatalytic activity of anatase titania [44]. Hence, all N-doped TiO<sub>2</sub> samples prepared using  $\text{scCO}_2$  show a higher photocatalytic activity compared to undoped TiO<sub>2</sub> nanomaterials. However, the activity enhancement for Zr modified TiO<sub>2</sub> samples is lower than the unmodified samples, although they had higher surface areas and smaller crystallites. Higher surface areas and smaller crystallites can be advantageous only if favorable surface structures exist in the photocatalyst, facilitating surface transfer of carriers [46]. Future work will further examine the sol–gel reaction pathways and how to control the photocatalyst structure for next-generation reactor geometries.

#### 4. Conclusions

Successful synthesis of ZrO<sub>2</sub> modified N-doped TiO<sub>2</sub> nanomaterials by a simple sol–gel process in  $\text{scCO}_2$  demonstrated that this is a promising technique for synthesizing anion- and cation-doped TiO<sub>2</sub> nanostructures. The formed Zr modified TiO<sub>2</sub> nanostructured materials have a high surface area, smaller crystallite size, and greater thermal stability which are highly desirable properties as catalysts, support materials, semiconductors, and electrodes in dye-sensitized solar cells (DSSCs). Moreover, all N-doped systems showed better performance compared to pure TiO<sub>2</sub> nanomaterials and N-doped TiO<sub>2</sub> showed higher activity compared to commercial P25 TiO<sub>2</sub> for MB degradation.

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